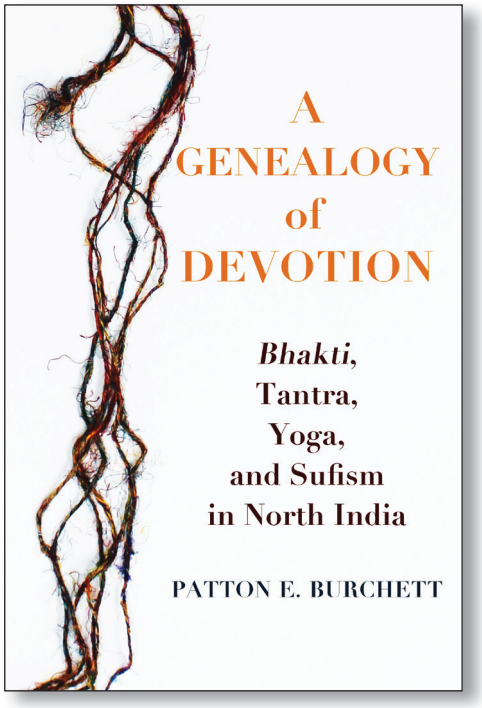
A Genealogy of Devotion

Bhakti, Tantra, Yoga, and Sufism in North India

Patton E. Burchett



How *bhakti* devotion took over Hinduism.

In this book, Patton E. Burchett offers a path-breaking genealogical study of devotional (*bhakti*) Hinduism that traces its understudied historical relationships with tantra, yoga, and Sufism. Beginning in India's early medieval "Tantric Age" and reaching to the present day, Burchett focuses his analysis on the crucial shifts of the early modern period, when the rise of *bhakti* communities in North India transformed the religious landscape in ways that would profoundly affect the shape of modern-day Hinduism.

A Genealogy of Devotion illuminates the complex historical factors at play in the growth of *bhakti* in Sultanate and Mughal India through its pivotal interactions with Indic and Persianate traditions of asceticism, monasticism, politics, and literature. Shedding new light on the importance of Persian culture and popular Sufism in the history of devotional Hinduism, Burchett's work explores the cultural encounters that reshaped early modern North Indian communities. Focusing on the Rāmānandī *bhakti* community and the tantric Nāth yogīs, Burchett describes the emergence of a new and Sufi-inflected devotional sensibility—an ethical, emotional, and aesthetic disposition—that was often critical of tantric and yogic religiosity. Early modern North Indian devotional critiques of tantric religiosity, he shows, prefigured colonial-era Orientalist depictions of *bhakti* as "religion" and tantra as "magic." Providing a broad historical view of *bhakti*, tantra, and yoga while simultaneously challenging dominant scholarly conceptions of them, *A Genealogy of Devotion* offers a bold new narrative of the history of religion in India.

PATTON E. BURCHETT is assistant professor of religious studies at the College of William and Mary.

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"Vibrant, lyrical, and elegantly crafted, *A Genealogy of Devotion* is a scholarly opera on the history of *bhakti* (devotion) in India. Burchett fundamentally changes the way we think about *bhakti*, leaving readers with a book that is truly inspired."

—Christian Lee Novetzke, author of *The Quotidian Revolution: Vernacularization, Religion, and the Premodern Public Sphere in India*

"So wide-ranging in importance and so carefully and broadly researched, this is a book people will turn to for many, many years to come—both for its own special contribution and for a basic orientation to the field."

—John Stratton Hawley, author of *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement*

"Kudos to Patton E. Burchett for this rich, fine-grained historical analysis of the multifaceted relationships between the human agents of bhakti, tantra, yoga, and Sufism in Sultanate and Mughal India. Religious nationalists and other simpletons will find little comfort here."

—David Gordon White, author of *The Yoga Sutra of Patañjali: A Biography*

"Burchett's provocative study adeptly traces the transformation of popular religion in early modern North India from an age dominated by Śaiva, tantric, and yogic traditions to one permeated by Vaisnava *bhakti* piety. His well-argued thesis is that a crucial element in this shift was the interaction with and influence of Persianate and Sufi religiosity and cultural practices."

—Philip Lutgendorf, author of *Hanuman's Tale: The Messages of a Divine Monkey* and translator of *The Epic of Ram*

"Changing trends in religious patronage, the impact of Sufism, the varieties of religious practice, how *bhakti* poets disparaged tantra and yoga—these are among the fascinating historical issues explored in Burchett's path-breaking study."

—Cynthia Talbot, author of *The Last Hindu Emperor: Prithviraj Chauhan and the Indian Past, 1200-2000*

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Plan of the Work

This book is divided into three parts. Part 1 (chapters 1–3) presents an overarching historical narrative of Indian religiosity from the early medieval age to the Mughal period, with an aim to provide the necessary historical background and context for understanding the rise of *bhakti* in early modern North India and the significance of that event. In order to see the full picture, in chapter 1 I look back to the medieval period in South Asia, when tantric religiosity was a mainstream tradition pervasive in public culture. As I describe the distinctive features, historical development, and sociology of tantric religiosity, I also explore its relationship with *bhakti*. In particular, I show how tantric monastic orders and their institutions became key players in an early medieval religiopolitical economy linking lay *bhakta*s, tantric *yogī*s, and kings in exchanges of economic, political, and spiritual capital. In the process readers will also learn how, during this period, *bhakti* was regularly subordinated or assimilated to tantric ritual or yogic values and practices.

In chapter 2, I explore the ways in which the spread of Sufism and cosmopolitan Persianate culture during North India's Sultanate period paved the way for the explosive growth of *bhakti* in early modern North India. In particular, I examine a series of interrelated historical developments in Sultanate India that proved crucial to the emergence of North India's *bhakti* movement: the decline of tantra as a mainstream, institutionally based religiopolitical tradition; the spread of Persian cosmopolitan authority and the growth of a new shared Indo-Persian culture; the expansion of popular Sufism; and, relatedly, the emergence of a transreligious North Indian culture of charismatic asceticism and vernacular literary composition and performance. In the concluding sections of the chapter, I describe the new transregional, transsectarian *bhakti* public that was emerging in the later Sultanate period, the performative world in which its *bhakti* discourse circulated, and the distinctive ethical, aesthetic, and emotional sensibility cultivated within it. As will be seen, this *bhakti* sensibility resonated in remarkable ways with that of Sufism.

In chapter 3, I sketch out the historical context of Mughal India in which *bhakti* institutions and literature came to flourish. I focus especially on Akbar and the dynastic ideology, multicultural projects, religious policies, political alliances, and administrative structures developed during his rule, examining how the sociopolitical environment of Akbar's empire facilitated the successful growth of Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* traditions. As I illustrate, under Mughal rule North India witnessed a broad shift in which rulers increasingly allied themselves with Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* communities and their institutional forms and symbols while

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moving away from those of tantric Śaivism and Śāktism. Through an examination of the Kacchvāhā rulers of Amer in Rajasthan and the ways they provided other Rajput courts with a *bhakti*-centered model for political success, I show how new forms of courtliness and statehood initiated under the Mughal emperor Akbar were linked to the emergence of *bhakti* communities and *bhakti* literature.

In part 2 of the book (chapters 4–6), I move from broader historical considerations to a more focused study of the Rāmānandī *bhakti* community of early modern North India based on close analysis of manuscripts and other (never-before-translated) primary source documents. In chapter 4, the discussion focuses on the early Rāmānandī devotional community at Galta in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Examining the remembered lives of Kṛṣṇadās Payahārī—the founder of the community at Galta—and his two primary disciples, Kīlhadev and Agradās, provides insight into several key dimensions of *bhakti* and the *bhakti* movement in early modern North India. In analyzing the Galta Rāmānandīs, I demonstrate that the religiosity of the *bhakta* often had more elements of asceticism, tantra, and yoga than has ordinarily been supposed, while at the same time showing how a new understanding of *bhakti* was emerging in early modern North India and these once rather tightly interwoven threads of religious practice were beginning to unravel into increasingly distinct strands of religious sensibility. As will become clear, the case of the early Rāmānandī *bhakta*s suggests the need for revisions to widespread conceptions of the scholarly category of Bhakti.

In chapter 5, I compare and contrast the yogic-ascetic stream of the Rāmānandīs with the tantric Nāth *yogī*s in order to explore the ways in which the distinctive *bhakti* religious sensibility that was emerging in early modern North India was coming into tension and conflict with certain aspects of the tantric tradition. How were tantric Nāth ascetics and yoga-practicing Rāmānandī *bhakta*s similar and how were they different? To answer this question, I delve into the history of yoga, questioning and refining of the category of "the *yogī*" itself. In contrast to many scholarly claims, the yogic practice of the Nāths was considerably different from that of the Rāmānandīs and was an expression of their tantric Kaula and *siddha* heritage. As reflected in the Rāmānandīs' and Nāths' respective attitudes toward supernormal powers (*siddhi*s) in yogic practice, the early modern period in North India witnessed a widening gap between devotional and tantric conceptions of and approaches to the Divine. Indeed, at this time we see the emergence of a new *bhakti* sensibility constructed against the foil of attitudes and practices associated with the tantric *yogī*.

In chapter 6, I examine the formation of early modern *bhakti* sensibilities and communities through a case study of the life and compositions of a particular

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Rāmānandī figure, Agradās, the great—but little studied—sixteenth-century poet-devotee and founder of the Rām-*rasik* tradition. Using never-before-discussed manuscripts collected in the archives of North India, I demonstrate that the writings of Agradās teach us much about how *bhakti* communities in Mughal India went about defining their identities and competing with others for patronage, prestige, and power. Agradās inaugurated a vernacular literary project within the Rāmānandī community whose goals were to praise the deeds of great devotee saints and spread the saving message of *bhakti* in a manner that would simultaneously attract the respect of brahmanical orthodoxy, the recognition and financial support of elites, and the allegiance of devotee followers of even the lowest social classes. An entrepreneur in Mughal India's religious marketplace, his literary project strategically bolstered the position of the Rāmānandīs while simultaneously expanding the circulation of a transsectarian, transregional *bhakti* aesthetic, emotional, and ethical sensibility.

In part 3 (chapters 7–8), I pan out from the Rāmānandīs in order to conduct a broader investigation of early modern North Indian devotional poetry and hagiography. These two chapters demonstrate most clearly how developing *bhakti* sensibilities contrasted with and opposed tantric, yogic, and ascetic religious approaches, and the ways in which these *bhakti* sensibilities were Sufi inflected. In chapter 7, I survey and analyze references to Nāths, Śāktas, *yogī*s, yoga, tantra, and mantra scattered throughout the poetry of major *bhakti* saints. Discussing poet-saints who cover the spectrum in terms of sectarian affiliation, theological outlook, caste background, and geographical location, I show how a diverse array of *bhakta*s typically came together as one in positioning themselves against the "twofold tantric other" of the *yogī* and Śākta. In looking at the ways in which *bhakta*s contrasted themselves with tantric *yogī*s and Śāktas, we will achieve a better grasp of exactly what *bhakti* meant to devotees in early modern North India and how it was perceived as different from other modes of religiosity.

In chapter 8, I explore the Sufi inflection of the early modern North Indian *bhakti* by engaging in a comparative analysis of Sufi and *bhakti* literatures. I begin by examining the presence of the tantric *yogī* in the Sufi *premākhyān*s and in the poetry attributed to Mīrābāī and Sūrdās, wherein yoga is subsumed by devotion and the *yogī* subtly co-opted into the service of a message about the power of passionate love for God. I then turn to a consideration of miracle stories—especially involving spiritual competitions with *yogī*s—in Sufi and *bhakti* hagiographies, where we see the articulation of a shared conception of God and appropriate religious behavior, one formed in clear contradistinction to tantric and yogic-ascetic religious modes. In this penultimate chapter, I suggest important potential avenues of Sufi influence on North India's *bhakti* movement

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while adding further evidence for how the formation of devotional sensibilities in early modern North India relied in part on the stigmatization of tantric and yogic religious approaches.

In the final chapter, I suggest that widespread modern Indian conceptions of Bhakti and Tantra are not simply the products of British colonial influence and imported Protestant-biased Orientalist understandings; rather, they have important continuities with the attitudes and values expressed in the compositions of early modern *bhakti* authors, themselves influenced importantly by Persianate literary and political culture and a Sufi-inflected religious environment.

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